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Reflections Prompted by Laotse

A Psychological Approach

by Carol Baumann

The great number of varying translations, and even conflicting interpretations, of Laotse's "Tao-Tê-Ching" keeps on growing from year to year. Since there is no final proof, no absolute authority, everyone is free to interpret as he chooses, within the wide range of possible meanings which the compact richness of the Chinese verses allows. Although, from a scientific point of view, this may be deplored, it has the very great advantage that Laotse's profound wisdom may be used as a sort of reflecting glass in whose depths each reader may discover a different value while meditating on the enigmatical sayings.

Similarly, the lack of any factual knowledge concerning Laotse's life leaves us free to make speculations about his character, based upon the internal evidence contained in the "Tao-Tê-Ching". A number of deductions of a psychological nature may thus be made.

The various negative theories, such as that no such person as Laotse ever existed, and that the "Tao-Tê-Ching" represents a collection of old sayings derived from many different sources, seem rather futile, like the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy. If we once accept the text of the "Tao-Tê-Ching" as largely a homogeneous production, substantially the creation of one man, then we can examine the text for clues which may reveal the author's character, and from which we may deduce how he came to write the book. Whoever he may have been, or whatever his actual name, does not matter.

From this point of view chapter 20, the only completely personal chapter, can be taken as the key chapter, for it gives us a most human glimpse into the depths of the author's inner struggle, and it allows us to compare him with every great seer, east or west. I am well

aware that some sinologists cast doubt on the authenticity of chapter 20 – but to my mind it rings true. Indeed, from a psychological point of view, it serves to illuminate and intensify the meaning of the rest of the book, just as the shadow in a picture throws its beauty into relief. The admission of weakness is a source of hidden strength, as Laotse himself says:

**The Firm and Strong are followers of death
The Tender and Weak are followers of life. (Chap. 76) ¹⁾**

Taken in its deepest sense chapter 20 reveals a soul striving towards unity, and the background of the growth of a great wise man is filled out in human dimensions. The suffering depicted represents the dark travail, which always precedes the attainment of any profound spiritual insight, and we find the resulting flashes of bright illumination in other chapters. If it is permissible to translate *ping* (illness, disease) by "suffering" (as Wilhelm does) then Laotse himself tells us:

**Only he who suffers (in his) suffering
Gets free of suffering. (Chap. 71)**

Let us consider chapter 20:

Give up erudition – so be without care.
Between Yes and Yes-indeed where is the difference?
Between Good and Bad what is the difference?
What men revere must be revered.
Oh Wilderness! Thy center is not yet!
Alas! The multitude of people are so gay,
As if enjoying a great feast,
As if ascending terraces in Springtime.
I alone am held fast, without an omen –
Like an infant which has not yet laughed –

¹⁾ Other references, which might also be quoted in this connection, may be found in chapters 22, 28, 30, 43, 45, 55, and 78.

Roaming, roaming – as if without a home.
 The multitude of people all have plenty,
 I alone am as if lost.
 I have the heart of a fool! Alas!
 Chaos! Oh, Chaos!
 The men of the world are clear, so clear!
 I alone am as if confused.
 The men of the world are discerning, so discerning!
 I alone am sad, so sad.
 Restless! Oh, like the ocean!
 Tossed about! Oh, as if there is no anchorage!
 The multitude of people are all useful!
 I alone am stupid and clumsy.
 I alone am different from other men,
 But – I value seeking nourishment from the Mother. ²⁾

Although it is possible that the first four lines have fallen out of place, and really belong somewhere else, they never-the-less lead up to the personal lament, for they deal with the problem of the conflict between collective morality and individual responsibility. If one is on a quest all stereotyped erudition and learning must be put aside as useless,³⁾ just as the difference between “Yes” and “Yes-indeed” is a profitless matter of hair-splitting. But what constitutes the difference between Good and Bad? Is it possible to discover the primordial foundation upon which all morality finally rests? Obviously it

²⁾ This translation is my own (as are all the other quotations from the *Tao-Tê-Ching* in this paper) made from the Chinese text given by Carus in his 1898 edition. I have also studied and compared several other western translations, as for instance those of Waley, Giles and particularly Wilhelm. My translation has also been stimulated and influenced by a translation course under the sinologist Dr. E. H. v. Tscharner (of the Universities of Zürich and Berne) to whom I am especially indebted for his friendly criticism and generous advice.

³⁾ Waley suggests that the “learning” which is to be discarded is “the 3300 rules of etiquette”. Arthur Waley: *The Way and Its Power*, London 1934, p. 168.

is absolutely necessary for the functioning of society that the collective standards of morality be respected: "What men revere (or awe) must be revered (or awed)." But a man who is plagued by the necessity to understand the roots of things probes deeper than that, and his search forces him into an isolation where he feels cut off from all collective contacts and pleasures. After he has discovered his roots, however, contact with collectivity may be reestablished on a different and more meaningful level.

"Oh Wilderness! Thy center is not yet!" is the cry of every seeker, whether great or small, who finds that he must wander through an inner chaos; and he feels lost and disoriented until he discovers "the center", or becomes centered. Moreover, contact with that inner center is invariably lost and found many times before he feels assured of its underlying continuity, and realizes that it rests on an indestructible foundation of an eternal order.⁴⁾ Before he can reach that stage he must submit to the buffetting of the play between the opposites. Chapters in the "Tao-Tê-Ching" which deal with the opposites are so numerous that it seems superfluous to give references.

"Alas! The multitude of people are so gay, as if enjoying a great feast." Ordinary people, who are not troubled by the problems of the inner world, are lucky in that they can afford to live undisturbed one-sided lives, for they are not tormented by the doubts of the seeker and are free to enjoy the appearance of the outer world with light hearts. To the seeker this care-free condition appears all too enviable in moments of discouragement. As Goethe says in "Faust": "Du bist dir nur des einen Triebs bewusst, O lerne nie den andern kennen!"

The rest of chapter 20 enlarges on the contrast between "the men of the world" and Laotse himself. He describes his feeling of weakness,

⁴⁾ A description of the center of the psyche, and its foundation, has already appeared in these pages. See *Mitteilungen*, Vol. V, 1943, C. G. Jung: *Zur Psychologie östlicher Meditation*.

and all the disadvantages of being a seeker. He feels like an infant, lost, like a fool, confused and sad, tossed about without an anchorage, stupid and clumsy, in short "different from other men". But in the last line he sums up his one great advantage, which is worth the loss of all the collective advantages: "But — I value seeking nourishment from the Mother." He realizes that his difference from other men includes the gift of being receptive to the intimations of Nature's treasure house of wisdom. His weakness provides him with his greatest strength, for it opens a door to the highest possible insight — the revelation of Tao. "The empty shall be filled." (Chap. 22)

Taken in its most far-reaching sense Faust's descent to "the Mothers" in search of the secrets of the past, has a similar meaning; but there the primordial womb of creation remains hidden behind a mask of Greek mythology until, at the very end, the Mater Gloriosa appears and the "ewig Weibliche" is mentioned.⁵⁾ Although there exists a tremendous difference between the conscious psychology of east and west, and in particular a great difference in the relation between the conscious ego to the contents of the unconscious, the great archetypes which loom up, like towers of strength from a deep primordial level, are similar the world over, and touch a responsive chord wherever they appear. If this were not true the "Tao-Tê-Ching" would leave us completely cold, and could not possibly move us as it does.

But to return to Laotse's experience. In chapter 20 a moment of human weakness and despair is revealed to us, which none-the-less is in itself the unavoidable foundation of Laotse's further development, for it provides the "gateway of all mystery". (Chap. 1)

It is remarkable that Waley considers the main part of chapter 20 to be merely a *general* description "of the great gulf that separates the Taoist from other men" and he insists it "*cannot be taken as in*

⁵⁾ Compare Laotse, chapters 6, 52, and 61.

any sense a self-portrait of the author." Thus he deliberately rejects the deeper significance of the personal implications. This seems all the more astonishing because, in his invaluable introduction, he describes the religious attitude which lies behind Taoism with great sympathy and insight, and much of the information he gives might well be quoted in support of my theory. Giles, on the other hand, accepts chap. 20 as a personal description, but concludes: "These words, evidently written in great bitterness of spirit, may have been wrung from him by a sense of his failure to convert the careless generation . . . etc." Wilhelm expresses somewhat the same view as Giles, but I believe carries it nearer the truth when he compares Laotse's lament to that of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. XX: 8 ff). Wilhelm adds: "Es handelt sich um eine typische Erscheinung, die mit der Erlangung einer prinzipiell höheren Entwicklungsstufe stets notwendig verknüpft ist. Besonders interessant, weil in China die soziale Psyche den Sieg errungen hat über die individuelle." ⁶⁾

It seems to me that the secret which underlies the writing of the "Tao-Tê-Ching" is the probability that Laotse was visited by a cosmic vision of creation and the way it works. Such a great vision, like all visions which depict the unity of the universe, must have been overwhelming and indescribable. It had to be thoroughly digested, thought out, and recreated, before it could be formulated or expressed in words. In order to do this Laotse continually observed the working of Nature, and found that his observation of natural laws corroborated the insight of his vision. One might argue the other way around: that Laotse built his whole philosophy upon his observation of Nature. It may be so, but I believe if that were the case the end result would have been closer to a heap of dry facts, for such a theory does not sufficiently explain the poetical

⁶⁾ Arthur Waley: *The Way and Its Power*, p. 168; Lionel Giles, *The Sayings of Lao Tzu*, (Wisdom of the East Series, London, edition 1937) p. 17; Richard Wilhelm: *Vom Sinn und Leben*, Jena 1923, p. 97.

grandeur and profound inspiration which pervades the whole book. A man who has a baffling vision, on the other hand, will move Heaven and Earth in his effort to understand it; and when he reaches the point of being able to describe it an aura of revelation still clings to it. In such a case the vision itself provides the driving power which forces him to seek ways and means to express his experience. The very picturesqueness of some of the figures of speech suggest the possibility that a vision preceded Laotse's insight. The examples are too numerous to quote at length, but I wish to give references from at least two chapters:

Therefore to remain constantly without wishes
Brings vision of (Tao's) mystery. (Chap. 1)

Who sifts and purifies profound vision
May become free of defects.

When the gates of Heaven open and close
He is able to act (brood) like a mother bird.
Whose clearness penetrates to the four quarters
May remain without erudition. (Chap. 10)

Whether these passages indicate an actual vision ⁷⁾ or not they at least show that Laotse was himself "permeated by subtle mysterious forces". (Chap. 15)

In expressing his conclusions Laotse naturally used the idiom of his racial inheritance, just as every seer expresses himself in language steeped in the philosophical background in which he and his people are embedded. Just how much the racial and religious background affects the formulation of a visionary experience may be seen by comparing the Hebrew prophets, Christian mystics, and Buddhists. Moreover, examples of American Indian visions are most revealing

⁷⁾ Further passages, suggestive of an original vision, may be found in chapters 5, 6, 14, 21, 35, 47. The interested reader will no doubt be able to add still others to this list.

and instructive in regard to the relation between an individual inner experience and the collective matrix out of which it arises⁸).

The idea of Tao is one of the most ancient Chinese conceptions, and its meaning must have passed through many phases of development. It appears again and again in the oldest book of Chinese wisdom, the "I-Ching", but Laotse's insight poured still more meaning into the older concept. As the significance of Tao is of the greatest importance in the "Tao-Tê-Ching", let us consider the Chinese character afresh, in relation to its possible primordial meaning. The pictograph for Tao is made up of the sign for head and the sign for walking; therefore one might quite innocently jump to the conclusion that it means "going with the head" or the "conscious way". Such an interpretation is however un-Chinese, and quite misleading, in as much as mental or psychical activity (according to the Chinese) takes place in the *heart*, and not in the head. What then can the head here signify? As von Tscharner has already pointed out,⁹ the sign for head may have originally depicted a chieftain with some sort of head-dress, possibly feathers, designating his rank and position. Thus, if the pictograph Tao goes back to the time when the sign for head still carried some of the prestige of the chief, Tao may have meant: *walking like a chieftain*, or the *way of a leader*, or by derivation being led, for a true leader is in secret accord with invisible forces, and therefore is led in his leading¹⁰).

⁸) A striking example is to be found in: *Black Elk Speaks*, by John, G. Neihardt, (W'm Morrow & Co., New York, 1932).

⁹) See *Mitteilungen*, Vol. III, 1941, *Vom Wesen der Chinesischen Sprachen*, p. 47.

¹⁰) The Ogalala Sioux express the same idea when they say "walking in a sacred manner", *i.e.* being in tune with unseen forces (see *Black Elk Speaks*). The corresponding Christian expression is "being in a state of grace", but for many people these words have lost their original powerful significance. Incidentally there is an ancient poem in the fifth section of *Hung-fan*, in the *Shu-Ching*, which praises following the "royal Tao", describing its attributes as practically divine (see Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise*, Paris, 1934, p. 321).

In this connection the etymology of *sheng jen* (sage) is of interest. Wieger says that it refers to "those who listened to and understood the lessons given, and therefore became wise". Is it not possible that it once meant: *he who listens to the voice of Heaven*? In any case Wilhelm renders *sheng jen* as "der Berufene", literally the *one who is called*. The character *wang* (king or emperor) gives us a variation of the same idea. According to tradition the three horizontal lines stand for Heaven and Earth and the human world between, while the upright line is the man (*i. e.* the *kingly man*) who connects the three regions. He is the *perfect* or *complete* man, who keeps his feet on the earth and at the same time is in touch with heavenly forces; thus he lives in this world, and yet maintains communication with Heaven, which is also the world of ancestral spirits. Thus he connects the opposites. If a man lives only in the world of the spirits he loses contact with this world and becomes insane. If he lives only in this world, however, he remains incomplete, one-sided, or two-dimensional. He is cut off from the grace of Heaven and cannot know what Tao is.

Tao is the *natural order of things*, or everything working as Nature intended, in harmony with both Heaven and Earth. It is only Man who gets badly disoriented and "out" of Tao, and who is therefore forced to seek it again. The animals and plants all live "in Tao", for they follow the law laid down for them. Even during chaotic times they do not get upset, nor do they rebel when "Heaven and Earth separate" and all of Nature may be said to be out of tune. But Man, through his gift of consciousness, has freed himself to some extent from Nature's law; but this freedom has been dearly bought – for to be free from Nature's rule, even in a small measure, means that Man is *estranged from his own nature*. The only remedy is to seek Tao consciously, and yet Tao cannot be discovered by any effort of the will, or by trying to make things happen (as western man is all too prone to believe possible) or by any *activity* at all. It can only be

found indirectly, by *letting things happen*, and by awaiting inner understanding.

Tao is the way which lies between the opposites, but this includes the meaning that it also swings from one opposite to the other. In the west Tao is sometimes referred to as the "middle way", but a true reconciliation between the opposites consists not only in the wisdom of moderation, but also in the experience of extremes¹¹⁾. Those who remain always lukewarm can never attain that degree of vitality which is bestowed on those who submit to Tao's oscillation between the opposites¹²⁾. Furthermore no balance can be achieved if all the weight is placed on one side only; there must be no rigidity, no attachment to one side or the other, but rather a continual and meaningful transition or interchange. Man sleeps in the night and is awake by day; our whole life is full of rhythmical changes, just as each heart-beat consists of an active and a passive phase. In the famous commentary of the "I-Ching" called "Hsi-Tz'u-Chuan"¹³⁾ there is a definition of Tao which reads:

Now Yin – now Yang – that is Tao¹⁴⁾.

The extreme passivity, or quietism, sometimes attributed by westerners to the meaning of *wu wei* (non-action) is I believe misleading and partially incorrect. *Wu wei* does not mean being entirely passive, but being potentially active – or active with a special kind of awareness.

¹¹⁾ In this connection chapter 36 tells us:

That which one wishes to weaken
Must first assuredly become strong.
That which one wishes to cast aside
Must first assuredly be lived (or be allowed to flourish).

¹²⁾ See Rev. III, 15–16: "I would thou wert cold or hot. So then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

¹³⁾ Part I, chap. V.

¹⁴⁾ Wilhelm translates this passage rather cumbrously as "Was einmal das Dunkle und einmal das Lichte hervortreten lässt, das ist der Sinn" (*I Ging*, Vol. 1. p. 225), For a discussion of various other possible renderings see Granet, *La Pensée Chinoise*, pp. 119–120 and 325.

It means holding all ego-centric activity in restraint, while being ready to act in harmony with Heaven; without regard for personal aims being in tune with what is “meant” to be. And yet to understand it as altruistic behaviour is quite false, since acting with *wu wei* is acting without *intention* of any kind. Little children, deeply absorbed in their play, are living this kind of non-action quite unconsciously.

Laotse often speaks of the necessity of becoming like a little child or new-born babe, in order to attain the source of wisdom, for the sure instinct of a wise man depends on his simplicity. A new-born babe does not know what he does, but he does the right thing (*i.e.* he takes his nourishment, sleeps, cries, etc.). He does not consciously do any of these things himself, but rather they are done through him — we say by instinct. In the same way, on an entirely different level, a wise man acts most wisely when he does not fully understand what he is doing; in other words his greatest wisdom is a *gift which is given him*, and he acts wisely when he lets the wisdom act through him by *wu wei*. It is a paradox. On a banal level we all know this kind of acting. How often someone exclaims: “I don’t know *why* I did that, but it seems it was exactly the right thing to do!” Of course the stupidest possible things often happen in this way as well. The great difference between the actions of a wise man and those of an ordinary person lies in the fact that the wise man knows how to sift the various intimations he receives, and to discriminate between them. Thus he has a surer instinct and can avoid mistakes oftener than the ordinary person. There is another subtle but essential difference in that the ordinary person follows his instinct *unconsciously*, while the wise man *consciously* subordinates himself to the instinctive leading, once he has decided it is the right one to follow. It therefore seems significantly appropriate that the designation *Lao-tse* means “Old Child” or “Old Infant”, as well as “Old Wise Man” or “Old Philosopher”, for the true wise man remains like an infant in as much as he continually draws his nourishment from the breast of Mother Nature.

If only modern man could find the way to true simplicity, and in the best sense become as innocent as little children, many of his greatest problems would immediately evaporate. But the tragedy of modern man is that it is no simple matter for him to act "simply". Indeed it seems to be a most difficult, if not impossible, achievement; and anyone who tries to attain it must traverse a path full of pitfalls, mis-steps and mistakes. Only after he realizes through and through that his own nature is actually a part of the whole of Nature can he discover his real roots and finally get in tune with Tao.

In chapters 15 and 32 Laotse uses the simile of raw or "uncarved wood" (*p'u*). A piece of uncarved wood does nothing by itself, but through its non-action it holds itself in readiness to be useful when its turn comes. As a human analogy this has a double significance. A great artist, or poet, or inventor, or anyone who has genuine creative ability, would never dream of claiming that he himself has *created* his masterpiece. It is true that he must provide the form in which it is clothed, and must work hard to accomplish the best possible results, but the content and deepest meaning have been given to him. He acts merely as the tool through the use of which the creation finally assumes concrete form. Thus the greatest achievements come through into "reality" via the attitude of receptivity or non-doing of the human tool. Perhaps the difference between a greater or a lesser success is largely dependent on the quality of the *wu wei* of the tool. Laotse says:

The Sage . . . produces, yet retains not.

Work is accomplished, yet he remains not in it.

Even because he remains not in it (*i. e.* does not identify with it).

Therefore it lasts (*i. e.* has lasting value). (Chap. 3)

The second application of the analogy is that, under certain conditions, the character of the creative person becomes modified and transformed by his work, *i. e.* the "uncarved wood" of his character gets also carved, and he develops into a fully rounded personality —

as happened for instance to Goethe. In the case of a religious seer of the stature of Laotse it manifestly happened in the highest possible degree.

There is a saying in the book of Kuan-Tse (a forerunner of Laotse) which might be taken as a fitting description of the final development of Laotse's personality. After discussing the "mind within the mind" (*hsin*), which is, as Waley paraphrases Kuan-Tse, "the ruler of the body, whose component parts are its ministers" Kuan-Tse says: "Throw open the gates, put self aside, bide in silence, and the radiance of the spirit shall come in and make its home . . . Only where all is clean will the spirit abide. All men desire to know, but they do not enquire into that whereby one knows . . . What a man desires to know is *that* (*i.e.* the external world). But his means of knowing is *this* (*i.e.* himself). How can he know *that*? Only by the perfection of *this*¹⁵."

In chapter 54, after describing the observation of the working of Tao in the world, Laotse ends up:

How do I know that it is so?
Even through *this*.

In psychological terms, the "mind within the mind" corresponds to the innermost concentrated center of the psyche – the Self, a true realization of which gives rise to an understanding of both the outer and the inner worlds, of both the *that* and the *this*.

Thus the Sage hides his jewel under a coarse robe (or hair shirt). (Chap. 70)
He does not wish to appear important. (Chap. 77)

¹⁵) Translated by Waley, in the introduction to *The Way and Its Power*, p. 47.

